

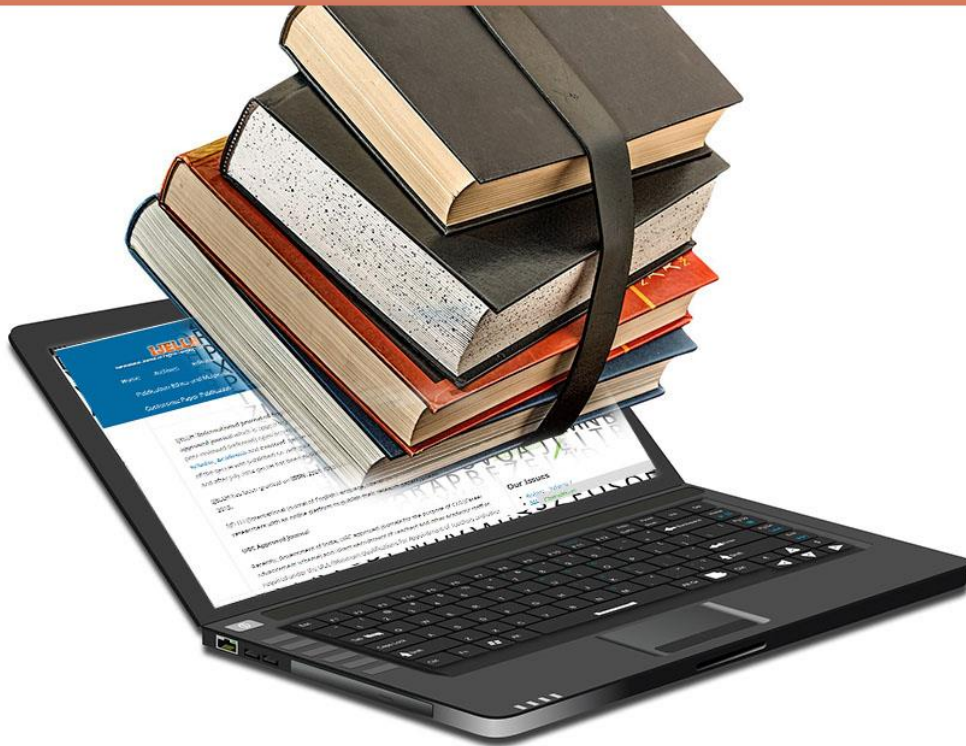
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Ideals of Sainthood in the East and the West: A Comparative Study of Murder in the Cathedral and Mira Bai (Little Plays from Indian History)

Quest for faith in an omniscient and omnipotent God is almost as ancient as human existence itself. In those early years, precarious life at the mercy of vagrant Nature resulted in Nature worship. The Romans worshipped Jupiter, the God of Sky and Thunder, the Mayans prayed to Bacab, the God of interior of Earth and to Cabulkan, the God of the Mountains and Earthquakes. The Indians had Mother Earth and Savitri and Savita in their pantheon. However in course of time, what was at first a code of conduct to appease Nature gradually came to be formalised, then became structured and finally was institutionalised as a particular religion. Each religion in its own way became rigid, demanding strict compliance and adherence to a prescribed code of conduct. But societies are dynamic and naturally enough, every once in a while old religious beliefs and practices were called into question. Numerous men and women have been martyred in this struggle between the old and the new religious beliefs. These martyrs have been canonized and venerated for their sacrifices, beliefs and virtues.

The present paper seeks to explore, compare and contrast the virtues that are venerated and celebrated in the East and in the West through the study of two plays: T S

Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Mira Bai from EL Turnbull's *Little Plays from Indian History*.

The Hindi word *Sant* and the English word *saint* are similar sounding and are often synonymously used. In the broader usage, both are applied to good human beings. But literally and linguistically the two words differ. The word *Sant* is derived from the root word *sat*, meaning truth and a *sant* is a person who is an embodiment of truth. The word *saint* on the other hand is derived from the Latin word *sanctus*, which loosely translates into holy. Catholic tradition canonizes a holy person for exemplary life of absolute devotion and performance of two major miracles. But the list of saints is not restricted to the canonized priests alone and to Catholicism. Almost all religions across the world have their saints and most of these have acquired the status of sainthood or popular veneration. It is therefore pertinent to explore the ideals that a society holds noble by studying the lives of men and women who came to be considered superior to their peers and therefore are venerated as saints/ sants.

Thomas Becket is one of the best known saints of Christianity and is venerated both by Catholics and the Anglican Church. In the eternal dispute between temporal and spiritual powers, Becket fought to uphold the superiority of the Church over Henry II and laid down his life for the cause. There are many renditions of Thomas Becket's life and of those, a significant one is that of TS Eliot, immortalized in the play *Murder in the Cathedral*. The play opens with the impending return of Becket to Canterbury after 07 years of exile. Appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas understood his allegiance to be with his God, his Church and his Pope. Henry on the other hand expected absolute loyalty from him, both in his capacity as a king and as his friend. When Becket excommunicated the priests, who anointed Henry II's successor without the sanction of the Church, Henry naturally enough was enraged. He keeps demanding that Becket take back the said priests in the fold and Becket

kept refusing. Finally, some knights, more royal than the king, took it upon themselves to settle the matter. They demand that Becket recant, failing which they kill him within the Cathedral at Canterbury. Eliot's Becket is visited by four tempters before his assassination-temptation of sensual pleasures, of temporal power, of allegiance and friendship and finally of eternal glory through martyrdom. But Becket stays true to his faith- overcoming all temptations and even the fear of death. When the priests at the cathedral seek to bar the door against the impending assassins, Becket commands them to unbar the door, claiming that he dies seeking neither earthly rewards nor heavenly glory.

In the East one of the most venerated folk saints is Mira Bai, a princess of royal blood and a devotee of Krishna. Born into the royal family of Merta, Mira was married into the Royal household of Rana Sanga. Legend has it that at the age of 6 while watching a marriage procession, Mira asked her mother where her own bridegroom was. Her mother pointed at the idol of Krishna and the child Mira took her mother at her words. Her devotion to Krishna as her husband was all surpassing, life long. Not even when she got married could she abandon her faith and bow to the expectations of her newly acquired family. She spent her time in her prayers, in composing songs and poems for her beloved Krishna. The romance of her life has been captured in a short play by EL Turnbull in a compilation called Little Plays from Indian History. In the opening scene Mira's Mother In law is pouting and complaining to her husband, the great Rana Sanga, of the unbecoming conduct of Mira Bai. Mira's flaws are reportedly many- she does not show proper humility, she is heard singing and talking to her deity in her chambers and is not mindful enough of her husband's comforts. But most of all Mira refuses to give up her worship of Krishna in favour of Durga, the presiding deity of the House of Rana Sanga. Rana Sanga seeks to reason with the young daughter in law. He points out that her persistence in her present ways would invoke even his displeasure, to say nothing of that of her Mother inlaw and her husband. The Rana seeks to distract her with visions of

children to come and jewellery procured. Mira is humble. She offers her throat to be slashed to the Rana as an abject apology for any perceived insult to the house of the Rana. Later when the Mother in law sends poisoned potion for her to drink, Mira drinks it without demur even as her nurse and maid protest and try to prevent her from drinking.

In the Indian tradition, Mira is venerated as a saint of the Bhakti Movement. Thomas is an early martyr of Anglican separation from the papal supremacy. He lived from 1119-1170, she from 1498-1547 (approx.) He a man, she a woman. He rose from the ranks to become the archbishop of Canterbury. She was born a princess and married into the illustrious family of the Brave Rajput Rana Sanga. He is a canonized saint. She reigns in the imagination of millions as a true devotee of Krishna. She was a householder and her dharma dictated duty to her husband, his parents, their household. He was a Catholic Priest and had to abide by the oath of Obedience, Chastity and Poverty. He dies a martyr, bravely facing his assassins, her death is shrouded in mystery though apparently two attempts were made on her life, which she faced indifferent to her fate.

John A Coleman has concluded that across time and place, saints have certain family resemblances such as: Exemplary Model, Extraordinary Teacher, Wonder Worker, Source of benevolent power, intercessor, a life often refusing material attachments or comforts, possession of a special and revelatory relation to the holy. Mira fails on all but one parameter. At least there is no documented record of her teachings or miracles. That she cared not for worldly pleasures is of course true. As for Becket, the Chorus of Women of Canterbury speak of his kindness. Murder in the Cathedral makes no mention of miracles performed by him or make any reference to his teachings.

Saints are “focal points of spiritual force- fields and they exert powerful attractive influence on followers but touch the inner lives of others in transforming ways as well,” claims Babb Lawrence

But what is the source of this influence? Quite obviously saints are revered for their undying faith, even in face of suffering and deprivation. Becket came to be canonized and Mira is a household name in India. The question worth exploring therefore is what is the basis of this faith? Both religions believe in the existence of a kingdom of God. The central tenet of Christianity is to endure transient suffering in this world, to attain eternal heaven. Christ sacrificed his life, for the sins of others and sat on the throne with God in Heaven, in perpetuity. Saints follow this tradition. Becket dies unyielding in his faith and embraces death with stoicism.

All my life they have been coming, these feet.

All my life I have waited.

Death will come only when I am worthy, and if I am worthy, there is no danger.

I have therefore only to make perfect my will.

And again

I give my life

To the law of God above the law of Man.

For a Hindu, the aspiration is to acquire moksha ie freedom from the cycle of birth and death and therefore from suffering and so Mira drinks poison willingly.

Kanha have I bought; the price He asked I paid

Some cry 'too great' while others jeer 'it was small'

I paid in full, weighed to the utmost grain

My love my life myself my soul my all.

Hinduism and its principal distributaries Buddhism and Jainism, advocate non attachment to earthly things and surrender to the will of God. Jainism teaches that physical suffering cleanses the soul so that it can merge with the luminous God. Buddhism advocates

the middle path and principal of non-attachment so that when the end comes the soul should not linger with earthly attachments but unite with God. In one of the interpretations of Bhagwad Gita, Chaitanya says, “A pure devotee is a soul who is forever surrendered to the Lord, just as a child is surrendered to his parents or an animal to its master. In the surrendering process, one should (1) accept things favorable for discharging devotional service, (2) reject things unfavorable, (3) always believe firmly in the Lord’s protection, (4) feel exclusively dependent on the mercy of the Lord, (5) have no interest separate from the interest of the Lord, and (6) always feel oneself meek and humble.”

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This in essence is the story of Murder in the Cathedral. This is the essence of Mira Bai’s life.

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